



The British Museum and Birkbeck's partnership

Case study: The British Museum and Birkbeck's partnership programmes in a changing policy climate.

The inception, success and failure of partnerships between universities and museums is often closely linked to government policy. This paper examines one such partnership - between Birkbeck and the British Museum - to demonstrate the impact of changing policy on collaborative projects.

In 2000 Birkbeck and the British Museum began to develop a Certificate in World Arts and Artefacts.¹ The logistical arrangements took some time to develop but after two years of pilot courses, the Certificate took its present form. It is taught in the education rooms at the British Museum and is designed to complement the Museum's temporary and permanent exhibitions, but is programmed and delivered by Birkbeck. It is an open access programme that consists of eighteen optional modules a year, taught at first-year undergraduate level. On average it attracts 300 enrolments per year, and unlike most art history programmes some 36% of our students are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds. Students range in age from their early twenties to their eighties.

To gain the Certificate students are required to take a two-term core course which addressed different approaches to world arts and covered subjects including tourist art, the impact of colonialism on indigenous arts, post-colonial strategies for developing 'national' arts and the interpretative functions of museum displays. This structure is changing and from 2011 students will take an introductory 'How to Study World Arts and Artefacts' module and choose two out of the four introductory courses that focus on the Americas; Africa; West and South Asia; East and South East Asia. This shift is directly connected to changing funding regimes and is a topic we will return to. The option courses examine specific material and expressive cultures in more detail, either through their history or through practice. For instance, students can acquire skills in Chinese brush-stroke painting, Arabic calligraphy and Islamic geometry and they can pursue conventional academic study in 'Twentieth-Century Japanese Art', 'The National Cinemas of Iran, Egypt and Turkey', 'Religious art in Judaism, Christianity and Islam' and other areas. Each year some of the modules are directly linked to the Museum's main exhibition programme, so for example the exhibition 'Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler' was accompanied by courses on 'The Man and Empire', 'Pre-Columbian treasures of South America' and 'Amerindian jewellery'.

The Certificate remains the only accredited adult education programme dedicated to world arts and artefacts areas in the whole of Britain and, in 2005, it was selected by London Centre for Arts and Cultural Enterprise (LCACE) as an example of good practice for museum and gallery partnerships. Nevertheless, it has recently been struggling to survive and in order to understand why that is the case we need to consider changing government policies and the funding of both higher education and museums.

The Birkbeck-British Museum partnership can be located in the policy directives of the New Labour government which came to power in 1997. The *Learning Age* green paper published in 1998 insisted on the importance of lifelong learning, suggesting that it enables us to develop personal confidence, enhances our quality of life and improves our chances of getting a job. When in work, the paper continued, learning provides the tools to manage technological and industrial change; it helps generate research, ideas and innovation, while in social terms it helps us to cope with the 'risk society'. In short, a learning society was perceived as being essential to the economy, to a sense of social cohesion and importantly as



offering a way out of dependency and low expectation.² These ideas were so widely disseminated that scholarly journals began to refer to 'the ubiquitous nature of lifelong learning'.³

In a series of subsequent papers and reports the government argued that museums had an important role to play in creating this learning society. *A Commonwealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom* (1997) argued that education in the United Kingdom was moving towards a 'mixed economy of formal and informal learning in which community participation, training and formal education are mutually enriching processes'.⁴ The report advocated that museums prioritised their educational work in order to contribute to this mixed economy, and strongly recommended that they develop educational partnerships with other agencies and institutions. This message was strongly reiterated in *The Learning Power of Museums* (2000) policy document which suggested that a combination of learning and leisure in museums could encourage adults who were intimidated by formal education to take their first steps towards lifelong learning.

Within this context the Birkbeck-British Museum partnership made perfect sense. Birkbeck specialises in part-time, research-led teaching and was well positioned to devise evening courses for the British Museum who wanted to provide a progression route from its gallery talks and day schools to accredited learning. Located in the museum, the Certificate enabled participants to progress into formal education without actually attending a university while working with Birkbeck ensured that the course had high educational standards. In other words the World Arts and Artefacts Certificate created a perfect bridge between informal museum learning and formal education. Moreover, the collaboration with Birkbeck helped the Museum meet another policy directive. Linked to the notion of museums as providers of informal and formal education was an emphasis on social inclusivity. *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All* (2000) advised museums to attend to the barriers that they and their staff created and to reach out to new audiences, specifically those groups that were usually under-represented in museums. Working with Birkbeck and developing a world arts and artefacts programme, rather than say museum studies which was also mooted as a possibility, was intended to and did diversify the Museum's usual audience, albeit on a small scale.

From the opposite perspective Birkbeck had much to gain from the British Museum. Teaching at the museum and using its collections would provide a real draw for students, and the British Museum had a huge audience base to draw upon – the diversity of its students not being of much concern for Birkbeck at this point. The World Arts and Artefacts certificate extended the range of Birkbeck's highly-regarded provision in western art history, it was a trophy partnership which reflected well on Birkbeck and, more prosaically, the British Museum provided free accommodation for teaching when space at Birkbeck was tight. So what changed?

When the Certificate began, Birkbeck received Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grants for each student. From 2001 funding increasingly became contingent upon students completing their assessments and then in 2007 funding was linked to students who were progressing up a ladder of qualifications. The majority of students who took certificate courses, particularly in the arts and humanities, already had higher qualifications and were studying for their own interest, or to develop their knowledge and skills in new areas. Although their will to study coincided with lifelong learning policies of the late 1990s, these students no longer attracted funding. Overnight, relatively



profitable programmes became uneconomic prompting many universities to close their faculties or departments of continuing education or lifelong learning. So far, the World Arts and Artefacts Certificate has survived by raising fees for Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) students and by making the programme more genuinely introductory so as to appeal to less qualified students – hence the new programme structure. These measures may be insufficient especially given the cuts in Higher Education funding which amount to some £449 million with promises of more cuts to come.

With the recession and the magnitude of United Kingdom's national debt, funding cuts have also loomed over the cultural sector, but pending a new government the precise nature of these cuts has remained unknown for the British Museum.⁵ In response to this the Museum has taken a more considered approach to its programming. Through a process of appraisal the staff found ways of reducing the costs and the bureaucracy involved in the World Arts and Artefacts Certificate and simplified the partnership. Importantly, they also concluded that the World Arts and Artefacts certificate contributed to departmental strategy. The British Museum aims at maximising audiences' engagement with collections and although lectures, gallery-talks and 'Lates' (evening programmes) can all engage large numbers of people over relatively short time periods, they do not facilitate the long in-depth study of the collections that the Certificate offers. Considering both approaches necessary, the Learning and Audiences department has continued to support the collaboration.

Although the World Arts and Artefacts Certificate started as an exemplar of government recommendations, it has been threatened by changes in policy and funding regimes. However, it is important to note that in some respects the effects of policy are limited. Universities and museums are slow-moving institutions and do not re-create themselves with each change in government. Instead they operate within long established modes of practice and while this inheritance can be problematic, it can also function as a safeguard. In this case, the British Museum and Birkbeck's belief that museums and universities are not simply businesses but must engender intellectual and creative engagement for the widest possible audience may serve to protect the World Arts and Artefacts Certificate for some time at least.

Authors

Dr Fiona Candlin
Senior Lecturer in Museum Studies, Assistant Dean, School of Arts,
Birkbeck, f.candlin@bbk.ac.uk

Rosanna Kwok
Head of Adult Programmes, Dept of Learning & Audiences, British
Museum, rkwok@britishmuseum.org

Endnotes

- ¹ The World Art and Artefacts students originally received either a certificate or diploma. From 2008 they received a Certificate of Higher Education. We have used the generic term 'certificate' throughout.
- ² 'The Learning Age: A Renaissance for New Britain,' (London: Department for Education and Employment, 1998).
- ³ Mark Murphy, 'Adult Education, Lifelong Learning and the End of Political Economy,' *Studies in the Education of Adults* 32, no. 2 (2000). 166
- ⁴ David Anderson, 'A Commonwealth: Museums in the Learning Age,' (London: Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). 89
- ⁵ At the time of writing a coalition government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrats had been formed.